

Political posing and the Plame inquiry

- Anna G. Eshoo
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The recent grand jury testimony of New York Times reporter Judith Miller may tell us more about who within the White House leaked the identity of undercover CIA officer Valerie Plame. While officials in the highest levels of government have been implicated, Congress has yet to demonstrate a sincere interest in getting to the bottom of this national security breach. For the second time in the past two years, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, in a rare public meeting Sept. 15, voted to block a Resolution of Inquiry into the disclosure of Plame's identity. The resolution would have forced the Bush administration to turn over documents and records related to this case.

As a committee member, I voted for the inquiry, and, if it comes up a third time, I'll vote for it again. Simply put, the disclosure of classified information, particularly the identity of a covert operative, places lives at risk. Such disclosures also undermine the morale of our intelligence professionals at a time when our nation is relying on their expertise more than ever before.

The need to protect information relevant to our national security seemed to be a priority of the administration. When a member of Congress allegedly leaked information in June 2002 about classified intercepts related to the Sept. 11 attacks, the administration's response was appropriately swift. Both the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's Office were called in to investigate. According to the Washington Post, "Vice President Cheney upbraided the Senate and House [Intelligence] committee chairmen in separate phone calls the next day, and White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer said President Bush had deep concerns about 'anything that could harm our ability to maintain sources and methods, and anything that could interfere with America's ability to fight the war on terrorism.' "

The disclosure of a CIA officer's identity should be a matter of utmost urgency for both the administration and Congress. By refusing to devote its attention to this case, Congress not only ignores the damage done to Plame, but the peril her blown cover creates for her colleagues and associates working in our intelligence operations. By identifying Plame, the name of the company she used as her cover was also exposed. As former CIA officer Larry Johnson told congressional committees, "This not only compromised her 'cover' company but potentially every individual overseas who had been in contact with that company or with her."

All Republican members of the Intelligence Committee voted against the resolution. They rationalize that congressional oversight of this issue would interfere with a pending criminal investigation. The special prosecutor assigned to Plame's case, however, stated in court filings that the investigation has been complete since October 2004. The resolution requested only the documents produced prior to that date, so it's unclear how Congress' review and inquiry could interfere with an investigation long completed.

It is well within Congress' purview to investigate matters of national concern, even when they run concurrent with legal proceedings. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has led an extensive investigation into the activities of lobbyist Jack Abramoff this year, even as Abramoff is the target of multiple criminal

investigations. Congress investigated Watergate, Whitewater, security breaches at Los Alamos National Laboratory, Enron's financial chicanery, Martha Stewart's insider trading, accounting irregularities at HealthSouth and the use of steroids in Major League Baseball -- all while criminal probes and prosecutions were continuing.

The majority claims that the resolution is "partisan," presumably because senior members of the White House staff, including I. Lewis Libby (Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff) and Karl Rove (President Bush's deputy chief of staff), have been implicated in recent press reports. Partisan differences should never be an excuse for launching a witch-hunt, nor should partisan loyalty prevent inquiries into matters of national security. Congress has the authority and the obligation to investigate and it should do so.

The investigation called for is not about partisanship and political differences, it's about national security. The "outing" of Valerie Plame is an unprecedented case where our government's highest officials revealed the identity of a clandestine operative. If left unaddressed, it will cause lasting damage to our vital intelligence operations and our national security.

Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, has been a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence since 2003.